OCs, fandoms, Furries oh my!

A history and reflection on sonas

By Clem Yung Ledbetter

(My fursona Nyx Illustrated by Rain)

Sonas
An Introduction

Sonas have breached containment!

A furry cultural artifact traced to the 80's have since long escaped roleplaying sites and fanzine publications into vast corners of the internet, with people creating sonas for media as wide ranging as Pokemon or The Pitt.

No longer is this fandom practice of creating an idealized self, avatar or different form exclusive to the "usual suspects" of anime like My Hero or multimedia "chronically online" projects like Homestuck. With Pittsonas, they have entered the world of prestige procedural dramas at a time of previously unknown fandom farming for content. As interviewers mine (however unethically) fandom materials like fanfics or ships for reactions (Bell), it's essential for clear definitions for sonas, their histories and the various groups they serve.

「Critters_Corner」's Fursona Diablo
(Used with permission)

Personal Furries, Characters, Mascots and Fursonas

An (extremely) brief history

The first mention of fursonas (that we can find) comes from a 1994 post on the newsgroup *alt.fan.furry*, a sort of decentralized forum pre-dating the contemporary internet . Though starting there would be starting at the middle.

Earliest conceptions of a furry self emerged in the late 80's through avatars, which people would "play" as in online text based spaces such as FurryMUCK (launched in 1990). To sign into FurryMUCK users had to come up with an avatar, customizing it through scents, species and names before engaging in roleplaying through all ages and explicit locations.

In this space came the conception of the "personal furry", both a form of mascot and avatar, but ever emerging idealized form. Whereas the avatar was just a depiction of the self as an animal, the personal furry existed as a fantastical goal self. Important to note is that this definition was very fluid and not shared by all, with different terms or definitions found on different platforms (Wolf).

On the blog fluffy rambles, user cerulean argues that they were more familiar with the term "character", as they were still active on newsgroups in the 90's, while FurryMUCK had moved to personal furry (fluffy).

Whatever the case, the differentiations mostly faded with the emergence of fursona in 1994, potentially because of increased centralization and further accessibility of the internet at this time (Wolf).

Sonas and their services

Fursonas are undoubtedly a huge part of the furry community, with resources like toy house acting as a marketplace for adopting or storing sonas, or Tomodachi Life serving as an early character creator for sketches or working out base concepts.

My fursona Nyx acts as a token for entrance into the wider furry community. Nyx is an aesthetic and gender based goal, infiltrating how I style myself and the music I listen to. I have playlists, pinterest boards and outfits that “bring out my racoon self.”

I can’t quite explain how I landed on a racoon, it just felt like a natural pick. The racoon is a punk figure, a survivor unafraid to dumpster dive, it felt more like a landing on a species rather than a choosing one.

Though fursonas act as some of the first sonas in fandom spaces, they aren’t the only kind, as various people explained through voluntary surveys for this project.

Kyleigh’s trainersona Alsu serves a mostly aesthetic function as a more femme version of herself. Kyliegh says this trainersona isn’t really used in fanart, fanfictions or anything of that sort, but serves as a sort of version of themself in the pokemon world.

“It's really just functions as my player character for pokemon, and how I'd answer the question of who I would be in the pokemon world.”

Some sonas are even less defined, not fitting a certain species or fandom. Galaxy’s (who uses it/its pronouns) sona isn’t fully one thing or another, but was explained as a “Mermaid fairy princess bug thing” that it mostly uses for roleplaying and a more casual form of roleplay Galaxy refers to as “playing dolls”.

Galaxy’s sona fulfills various functions. It's a tool for roleplaying, both casual and erotic in nature, as well as an aesthetic goal. “Would love to have green skin naturally pink hair horns antennae four eyes fairy wings claws gills and the ability to change between legs and mermaid tail at will <3” Galaxy said.

Galaxy’s sona Princess
(Used with permission)

Sonas as mask

One word I heard constantly in reference to sonas, from all kinds of academic books, journals and commercial character storage sites was the word “mask”. Sona, after all, comes from the latin “persona” a theatrical mask (Gellar-Goad).

As academic T.H.M Gellar-Goad writes in his work *Masks,* masks are used throughout life and different social situations. They are “artificial products that represent a real thing” (Gellar-Goad) including everything from height, race, makeup or gender. Some masks, such as makeup, are adopted for social benefits, aesthetic actualization or for fulfilling a “professional look” in job interviews. Others, such as race or gender, are dependent on the observer or wearer, with potential for alteration or emphasis.

Sonas, whether ponysonas, trainersonas or fursonas are no different. Detached from the personal uses or desires a sona fulfills, when used as a profile picture they serve as a first impression of someone in a fan space. They show that someone “knows ball”.

One of the most famous examples of the sona is the ponysona, a fan persona emerging from My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. A 2019 study found that 43% of fans held a ponysona, which were typically used for profile pictures, role playing and fanfiction (Kosnáč).

Rain (who uses she/he pronouns) has a bat pony hybrid ponysona named Rainstories that he has mostly retired. Rainstories came about after watching various pony analysis videos, where content creators would superimpose a ponysona or pony avatar onto clips leading her to really desire one. Rain’s ponysona acted mostly as an avatar in fandom spaces, where he would spend early paychecks commissioning various artists to draw Rainstories as her ocs acted as a hyperfixation at the time.

Rain's Ponysona Rainstories
Illustrated by Teareyedanimal
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Sonas in Conclusion

Sonas are built into the core of modern fandom spaces. Emerging from proto-internet user forums, popularized from the early brony centers of 4chan (Kosnáč) and the various challenges and trends for pittsonas and spidersonas (which even appeared in official spiderverse comics!)

They function as masks, some temporary, others permanent, fulfilling dreams, desires and transition goals. They are avatars, dolls, projections and goals for self actualization. In some instances, they even have spiritual qualities.

In my most vulnerable moments, sonas have helped to connect me to communities of like-minded people and act as a repellent against everpresent gender dysphoria. When you struggle to see yourself as a girl, seeing yourself as a racoon is a good placeholder.

May a thousand sonas bloom, and may they all contradict each other in definition. So long as they bring joy.

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A zine on sonas of a variety of genders and genres with resources ranging from scholarly books, furry blogs and Teen Vogue articles

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